The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars

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Old Wars and Future Wars: Causation and Prevention

History is the study of events that have happened only once; political science is the effort to generalize about them. These caricatures sometimes seem an apt description of mutual reactions when members of the two professions discuss the origins and prevention of major wars. It might be amusing were it not that the next major war could be the last. Nuclear war is too serious to leave to either historians or political scientists alone.

As Waltz argues below, conflict may be endemic in human behavior, but war has its origins in social organization. Nonetheless, general theories of the causes of war can be misleading. "It is assumed, for instance, that there is a class of events involving human behavior that can be legitimately subsumed under a single term 'war.' True, the events have a common observable factor—organized violence perpetrated by groups of people upon each other. But that is near the extent of the commonality."[1] This volume does not search for a common set of causes of all violence from tribal vendettas to world wars. Instead, it focuses on the upper end of the scale.

Since the development of the modern state system in Europe some four centuries ago, there have been ten general wars involving a majority of the major powers and a high level of battle deaths.[2] Some of these wars stand out in terms of their consequences for the hierarchy and structure of the system of states. In his article, Gilpin refers to them as hegemonic wars. Historians do not agree on the exact set of such wars, but at a minimum

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1 Anatol Rapoport, "Approaches to Peace Research," in Martin Nettleship, R. Dale Givens, and Anderson Nettleship (eds.), *War: Its Causes and Correlates* (The Hague, 1975), 44.

2 Jack S. Levy, "Theories of General War," *World Politics*, XXXVII (1985), 372.

most would include the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648); the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1792–1815); and the two world wars of the twentieth century (1914–1918, 1939–1945). Each of these wars is discussed below as well as the earlier wars of the Ottoman Empire for control of eastern Europe. By looking at major wars of the past, we learn about the potential causes and prevention of major war in our own time.

Historians and political scientists tend to approach this task differently. Political scientists strive to generalize and develop theory; historians probe the layers of complexity and the potential pitfalls of overly simple analogies. Each has strengths and weaknesses. Poor political science runs the risk of false simplicity; poor history describes causality through irrelevant detail and confused complexity.

Some theory is unavoidable. Like John Maynard Keynes' practical man of affairs, unknowingly the mental prisoner of some scribbler whose name he has long forgotten, so the historian faced with an infinite supply of facts must follow some general principle to select and make order of them. As Waltz argues in his article, a theory separates a particular domain (such as international politics) from its surroundings and gives a picture of the connections among its parts. Bueno de Mesquita adds that such mental constructs specify a simplified, ordered view of reality in order to reveal internally consistent and externally useful general principles.

There are different views about how to judge theory in the social sciences. The model of the natural sciences is not fully applicable where there is no laboratory to hold variables constant, and in which human choices are not fully predictable. Nonetheless, one can speak of the range and power of different theories. Theories of limited range cover a narrow domain of cases or a limited period. Their generalizations hold only within carefully specified limits. The explanatory power of a theory is a more complex concept and involves two dimensions often at odds with each other: parsimony and descriptive fit. Parsimony is the ability to say a lot with a little. It is the principle of Ockham's razor: shave away unnecessary detail. However, parsimony is only one dimension of power. Inventing parsimonious explanations is easy; inventing parsimonious explanations with a reasonable descriptive fit is rare. Explanatory power requires accounting for behavior

with few anomalies. Since theory (by definition) is not pure description, there will always be problems of descriptive fit. Some anomalies are inevitable. The most powerful theories are the least procrustean in their treatment of anomalies. They also encompass more corroborated empirical content than their alternatives.[3]

Successful prediction is one sign of a powerful theory, but determining success is often ambiguous. When theories predict general categories of behavior rather than specific events, there is room for interpretation of how successful (or unsuccessful) a theory has been. For the same reasons, it is difficult to falsify such theories. Proponents challenge interpretations and introduce auxiliary hypotheses to save their theories. Yet a good theory should specify conditions which, in principle, could falsify it. For example, Darwinian theory is not good at predicting the evolution of particular species, but the discovery of mammal bones in the Precambrian strata of rocks would falsify it.

Most theories in social science are of limited range and modest power. In part the weakness of the theories reflects the nature of the domain. As a political philosopher has counseled, "A rational social scientist might well learn to relax and to enjoy the rich diversity and uncertainty that mark his calling. . . ."[4] As Maier argues below, post-Enlightenment historians do not seek to identify the constant traits sought by Enlightenment historians or by some contemporary political scientists. Instead, they map complicated and unanticipated causal chains, not foreseeable individual reactions. They see history as a temporal process of development, rather than as a warehouse of examples. This indeterminacy does not make history useless to policymakers.

> For history to provide insights applicable to present conduct, it must explain why other outcomes did not prevail—not in the sense that they could not, but in the sense that they might well have. . . . By exploring what conditions would have been needed for alter-

3 Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *idem* and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (London, 1970), 91–180; Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," and Donald J. Moon, "The Logic of Political Inquiry," in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, Mass., 1975), I, 131–209; VII, 79–138.

4 Judith N. Shklar, "Squaring the Hermeneutic Circle," *Social Research*, LIII (1986), 473.

native outcomes to materialize, history can assume a heuristic role. It thereby suggests how freedom of action is foreclosed or seized.[5]

Such a method of counterfactual argument cannot assign precise probabilities, but it does raise the historian out of total immersion in the particularity of one time and place. This counterfactual reasoning is also an area of common ground with political scientists. Such "post-diction" represents a means (in the absence of a laboratory) of estimating the range and power of theories.

In practice, there is a long tradition of theorizing about international politics and the causes of war. Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* was more than a descriptive account of battles. Gilpin discusses Thucydides' interest in setting forth a general account of how such wars occur. This theory led Thucydides to select and emphasize certain facts rather than others.[6] Thomas Hobbes was indebted to Thucydides and his focus on power. Indeed, the preponderant school of thinking—both academic and practical—in modern European history has stressed the fundamentally anarchic nature of the international system and the struggles and balances of power among states that result. This "realist" tradition became dominant in the United States after 1945. Theorists such as Hans Morgenthau were well read in history and wanted to warn their countrymen against reverting to the idealism and isolationism that they believed helped to bring on World War II.

As Waltz describes in his article, Morgenthau never developed a fully coherent theory, and there are a number of ambiguities intrinsic to classical realism. Terms such as power and balance are used loosely. Some theorists hold that war is more likely when power is nearly balanced, whereas others argue that it is more likely when one side has a preponderance of power. Still others point out that the balance of power is a principle for maintaining the independence of states, not peace.[7] The first three articles in this volume represent theories which refine different aspects of the mainstream realist tradition. They all focus on states that act rationally in response to incentives created by their en-

5 Charles S. Maier, "Wargames: 1914–1919," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII (1988), 821.

6 Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, 1969).

7 Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York, 1955), 30.

vironment—defined as the international system of states. In that sense, they are analogous to microeconomic theories in which firms respond rationally to market incentives.

Waltz's neorealist theory portrays power as a means rather than a goal deeply rooted in human nature. It predicts that states will act to balance the power of others in order to preserve their independence under the anarchic situation in which they find themselves. It does not try to predict particular wars, but the general propensity to war. It focuses attention on the structure (distribution of power) of the system. Waltz argues that bipolar systems are more stable and peaceful because they involve less uncertainty than multipolar systems. The opponents and their relative power are clearer, and shifts in alliances make less difference.

Waltz's theory has the virtue of broad range and great parsimony, but its explanatory power is less impressive than might first appear. The theory is static. Since changes in the structure of the system are rare, other causes must be invoked to explain most wars.[8] Waltz defines bipolarity very narrowly as involving the power of the two largest states, not two tightly knit coalitions. By this definition, neither the Greek city-state system at the time of the Peloponnesian War nor Europe in 1914 was bipolar. Historians are hard pressed to find cases before 1945 to test the theory. Further, as Waltz admits, the peace of the bipolar world since 1945 owes a great deal to the existence of nuclear weapons, which he calls a feature of the units in the sysem rather than its structure. Nonetheless, because diffusion of power is occurring and a multipolar system may evolve in the future, Waltz's theory focuses attention on important questions about the propensity to make war under such conditions.

Bueno de Mesquita's theory also had broad range and great parsimony. Moreover, there is something commonsensical about an expected utility theory that says states go to war when they expect to do better than by remaining at peace. This explanation is not the same as saying that states go to war when they expect to win. As Sagan's article shows, Japan chose war in 1941 not because it expected to win, but because even a modest prospect of success was better than sure defeat if the American oil embargo

8 See Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York, 1986), 158–203.

was allowed to take its course. By refusing to assume that states have similar reactions to risk, Bueno de Mesquita is able to resolve differences among realists about whether a balance or a preponderance of power is more likely to produce war. Power itself is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a rational realist to choose war or peace. The distribution of power (Waltz's structure) has no direct bearing on the likelihood of war independent of different utilities.

Bueno de Mesquita admits some limitations to his theory. He aggregates utilities at the level of the state, but they may not remain consistent under the pull of domestic politics. And leaders may have different psychological reactions to taking risks to avoid losses as compared with achieving gains even though the expected utility is the same. Moreover, in strategic interaction, states may bluff rather than act on their true utilities. Even more fundamental is the debate over the power of the theory. For some historians, his use of what he calls "stylized facts" compresses the temporal flow of history and represents parsimony purchased at the expense of descriptive fit. Others argue that the theory lacks power because it says so little about where utilities come from and how preferences are shaped and change over time. It says little about what variables of international politics are relevant. In a sense, it is not a theory of international politics at all, but a model borrowed from microeconomics and applied to international politics. If one believes that the rational-actor assumptions of microeconomics have not done all that well when applied to macroeconomic policy, then one might be skeptical about the promised power of the theory even if problems such as intransitive preferences and non-rational psychological responses are overcome. Nonetheless, the microeconomic metaphor directs the attention of historians to important questions about rationality and war.

Gilpin theorizes about hegemonic wars resulting from changes in the preponderance of power as a result of uneven growth among states. Essentially, he updates Thucydides' variant of realism. The theories he develops are dynamic but incomplete. They deal with wars which have major structural effects on the international system, but, as Gilpin points out, they do not specify whether the nation in decline or the challenger is likely to start the war, nor what the consequences will be. Nor is it easy to identify hegemonic wars in such a way that the argument is

nontautological. Although Gilpin sees hegemonic wars occurring at roughly 100-year intervals, he is skeptical of the causation adduced in cyclical theories.

Gilpin's own argument is that states act rationally to try to change the system to advance their interests in response to shifts in the distribution of power, but unanticipated consequences can give rise to hegemonic wars that no one wanted. This admission of uncertainty improves the descriptive fit, but weakens the parsimony and overall explanatory power of the theory. Given the effects of uneven growth and the role of declining power in the onset of World War I, as described in Williamson's article, Gilpin's theory also brings attention to important issues. But a powerful theory must explain why and when dogs do not bark as well as when they do. A powerful hegemonic transition theory would explain the absence of war between the United States and Britain in the 1890s and the relatively pacific withdrawal of Spain after the seventeenth century. It would also suggest what to watch for in the relationship between the United States and East Asia in coming decades.

The articles by Levy, Jervis, and Quester concentrate on perceptions and domestic politics. They make no claims to powerful or parsimonious general theories. As Levy points out, the complexity of the linkage between domestic political factors and the causes of war has made historians feel at home with their line of work but has discouraged broad theorizing by political scientists. Marxist and liberal theories about economic structure and war have not held up well under the test of events. A version of liberal theory that explains why democracies do not fight *each other* is interesting but limited in range.[9] Scapegoat theories relating internal conflict to external conflict have generally been poorly formulated and tested.

Jervis explicitly admits that there are so many kinds of misperceptions with so many different effects that it is impossible to develop an overall theory of misperception as a cause of war. Nonetheless, he argues that misperception often plays a large role, and that certain modest propositions can be developed. Many historians agree. Blainey has argued that "it is not the actual

distribution or balance of power which is vital; it is rather the way in which national leaders *think* that power is distributed. . . . War is a dispute about the measurement of power. War marks the choice of a new set of weights and measures."[10] Excessive military optimism is frequently associated with the outbreak of war. Jervis points out that it is especially dangerous when coupled with political and diplomatic pessimism. Jervis' observation makes a useful auxiliary hypothesis to the power transition theories that Gilpin addresses.

Quester's discussion of brinkmanship and crises of resolve is an illustration of how both perceptions and the logic of war change sequentially under certain conditions. Both parties may start out in a game such as "chicken," in which both are better off if there is no war. But the process of crisis escalation and the belief that war is inevitable and imminent may transform the game into one of Prisoner's Dilemma, in which it is better to strike first than to be struck first. As Quester points out, wars of attrition or contests of endurance encourage the "rationality of irrationality." Each side pretends indifference to disaster in order to win the contest of resolve in the game of chicken. But there is danger that the pretense could become reality as the game changes or unforeseen events occur. Maier and Bueno de Mesquita describe how each step in War War I seemed to be a rational choice to the participants as the sequence unfolded. As Maier puts it in his essay, "From one point of view the war was 'irrational,' risking national unity, dynasties, and even bourgeois society. Many of the European statesmen . . . claimed to understand that such long-term stakes were involved . . . they did not think they were in a position to act upon these long-term forebodings. Rather, they saw themselves confronted with decisions about the next step."[11] Although each step may be rational in a procedural sense of relating means to ends, the substantive outcome may be so distorted that one should refer to it as irrational.

None of the political theories discussed above is very powerful, but each suggests interesting questions for historians to consider as they map the complex causality of major wars and

10 A. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York, 1973), 114.
11 Maier, "Wargames," 840.

try to structure counterfactual arguments that illuminate the range of choice and the limits that statesmen face. In addition, the various theories suggest different attitudes and problems regarding the prevention of a major nuclear war.

The implications of Waltz and Bueno de Mesquita's theories are optimistic. For Waltz, the stability of the bipolar structure is reinforced by the prudence which nuclear weapons engender at the level of the individual states. In terms of expected utility theory, a major nuclear war should be very difficult to start. There would be no political goals which leaders could hold commensurate with the absolute magnitude of destruction that their nations would suffer. This situation is the crystal-ball effect.[12] In 1914, if one could have shown Europe's leaders a crystal ball with a picture of the devastation in 1918, they might have drawn back from war rather than become trapped in the sequence that Maier describes. An elementary knowledge of the physical effects of nuclear weapons serves as today's crystal ball.

Gilpin agrees that a nuclear balance of terror has created a new basis of international order among the superpowers in contrast with the earlier balance of power. But he argues that change in the nature of warfare has not necessarily altered the nature of international politics. Struggles for hegemony continue, and one cannot rule out the possibility of hegemonic war in the nuclear age. "The theory of hegemonic war does not argue that statesmen 'will' a great war; the great wars of history were seldom predicted, and their course has never been foreseen."[13] The essays by Jervis, Quester, and others tend to reinforce Gilpin's cautionary note. Misperceptions and situational irrationality can occur in the nuclear age. Crystal balls can be clouded by misperception or shattered by accident.

How likely are such dangers? Howard argues that it is difficult to find any historical cases of accidental war. Blainey argues that unintended war is also rare. It is not enough to say that "neither side wanted war." Like Bueno de Mesquita, he argues that "every preference for war or peace is attached to a price.

12 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Nuclear Ethics* (New York, 1986), 61.

13 Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII (1988), 611-612.

. . . What was so often unintentional about war was not the decision to fight but the outcome of the fighting."[14] In one sense, Blainey is correct. Someone decides. There are no purely accidental wars. But the important questions are how the preferences for war or peace are shaped, and how the compression of time in nuclear crises may magnify the effect of nonrational factors.

A nuclear war is unlikely to start by accident or by purely rational calculation. But the intersection of rational and nonrational factors may greatly increase risks in a crisis.[15] Nonrational factors include psychological stress clouding judgment (witness Joseph Stalin in June 1941); organizational complexity (for example, the straying of a U-2 reconnaissance flight over the Soviet Union at the height of the Cuban missile crisis); misdirected or misunderstood communications (note the examples in the articles by Sagan, Hughes, and Jervis); and accidents (which may have greater effects on perceptions in a nuclear crisis when there is less time to correct them). Under the influence of such nonrational factors, situationally constrained rationality could persuade a leader who believed nuclear war to be imminent and inevitable that it would be better to strike first than be struck first.

The fact that such scenarios are possible and that the consequences would be devastating lead one back to the proposition that major war in the nuclear age is too important to leave to the political scientists or historians alone. Their strengths and weaknesses complement each other as they turn to history as a substitute for a laboratory. Historians should pay heed to questions about rationality, perceptions, crises, and power transitions raised by some of the most interesting political theorists. Political scientists must pay heed when historians challenge their stylized facts, warn against the loss of temporal context and sequences, and point out the dangers of mistaking theory for reality. Both need to cooperate in formulating the counterfactual arguments that can illuminate the range and limits of choice for policy.

14 Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 12. Blainey, *Causes of War*, 15, 144.

15 See Graham Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Nye (eds.), *Hawks, Doves, and Owls* (New York, 1985), 206–222.